

## VANTAGEPOINT

By Dane L. Peters

# Dropping the ball

**H**ave you been caught underestimating your child's abilities? Sorry to say, I have.

Recently, I was visiting a physical education class of three-year-olds. I was standing in the balcony of the gym, out of sight, with a view of the entire room. The teacher positioned the class of 12 around a flattened parachute. She instructed the students to grab the edge and in unison ruffle the light, colorful fabric. The children were fascinated by the motion of the cloth.

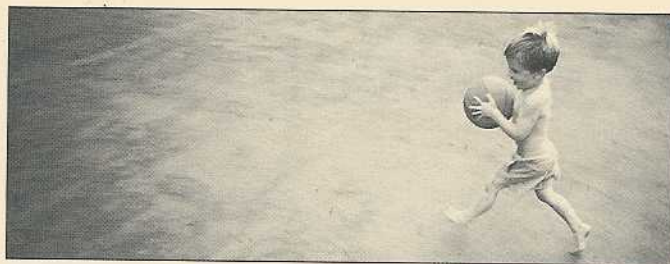
The teacher then introduced a large bag of foam rubber balls about the size of apples. While the parachute was resting on the floor, she assisted several children as they dumped the bag of balls onto the center of the orange and yellow silk circle. Her next instruction was, "Let's make popcorn. Grab the parachute and make your arms move up and down. . . faster. . . faster." On the last command, the balls began flying out of the confines of the parachute. The teacher then said, "Now, let's shake all of the balls out of the parachute." And they did — every last one.

There must have been 50 balls strewn over the entire gym floor. "Okay, let's gather all of the balls and put them back into the bag," the teacher instructed. With hysteria-like enthusiasm, the students scattered about collecting the balls.

This is the part that really caught my attention. In a matter of a minute, I watched one child pick up one ball in her left hand and run and drop it into the bag. Another child ran to a cluster of balls, captured one with her left hand, another with her right hand, and ran back to the bag. And, yet, I saw a different child pick up one ball in his right hand, cradle his left arm into a basket, and gather five more balls. He was working intently, making sure none dropped on his precarious walk to the bag.

I saw a little three-year old dragging a plastic milk crate she found in the corner of the gym. She was pulling it along, collecting balls as if they were cotton during harvest time. Her efforts netted her 11 balls in one trip. Finally, out of the corner of my eye, I could see a little tyke on the edge of the gym picking up balls and winging them aimlessly away from the ball bag. I laughed to myself and wondered.

The joy I gained in watching this class was short-lived. I immediately began a reverie analyzing and evaluating the worth of each child's efforts and abilities. Wasn't it amazing how one child was dutifully gathering just one ball, content and fulfilled with her work, while another child was collecting a multitude



using a crooked arm or an available plastic crate? Is that a difference in ability? Is that an example of nurture versus nature? Or is it how giftedness is assigned? And what the heck was the little guy thinking when he was throwing balls away from the bag?

Calling on my experience as a teacher and parent gave me pause but assurance that, in fact, these were children at play, enjoying a task, intent on pleasing themselves and their teacher.

After lunch, I commented on how much I enjoyed the parachute class. I asked the teacher if she noticed the differences in the abilities of each child.

"What do you mean?" she replied.

I said, "Well, you know — the one girl who picked up just one ball; the other girl who gathered one in each hand; the boy who used his arm like a basket; and the one who dragged the crate around. And, finally, what was with the boy who was throwing the balls like a major league pitcher? What a difference in abilities! I guess that's the beginning of what distinguishes the most able from the children who struggle in their work."

Her response was rapid fire, startling, and direct. "Claire, the girl who collected one ball at a time is extremely careful in all that she does. You should see the way she keeps her cubby and how she carefully prepares her rug for nap. The boy, Ben, who used his arm like a basket, tripped and chipped his tooth later this morning because he was pressing to carry too many things back to his desk — trying to avoid making two trips. Lisa, who grabbed the crate, knows that she is not supposed to use that because of its sharp edges; and as for Ricky, the boy who was winging balls away from the parachute, he was eliminating the red balls. He knew that they did not belong in the collection of yellow balls. The red balls are always used by the older students and are stored in the corner of the gym."

Embarrassed, I silently admonished myself for not looking beyond what I initially saw and for not giving this class of three-year-old children a "whole" evaluation. My own children, as they grew up, often surprised me with their insights, perseverance, and accomplishments; they still do.

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